

# Caribbean Persephones: Motherlessness in Buchi Emecheta and Maryse Condé

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## 要 約

### カリブ海のペルセボネたち——ブチ・エメチェタと マリーズ・コンデが語る「母のいない娘」の物語

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男性の暴力によって母とひきさかれた娘の悲劇の典型であるギリシャ神話のペルセボネは、ヨーロッパのおとぎ話ではシンデレラや白雪姫のようなロマンチックな孤児のヒロインとなった。彼女たちは魔法の力に助けられ、最後には「プリンス・チャーミング」によって救われる。英米の小説にも、『ジェイン・エア』を始め、この系譜が見られる。では、植民地の歴史をもつカリブ海の小説では、母とひきさかれた娘たちはどうなっただろうか。

娘を失った母デメテルの苦悩や、失われた娘に与えられるロマンチックな報償は英米文学のなかでも繰り返し語られてきたので、私たちは読み慣れているが、娘の苦しみは無視されてきたようだ。ブチ・エメチェタの家族』とマリーズ・コンデの『デジラダ』は、無視されてきた孤独な娘の物語である。両作品の女主人公はまず幼いうちに母と別れ、子供時代の悲惨な体験に耐え、思春期直前になると楽園のようなカリブ海の島からむりにひき離される運命を迎える。すなわち「母国」をも失うのだ。ギリシャ神話では、母デメテルと娘ペルセボネの再会は春の訪れを意味しているが、エメチェタとコンデの女主人公グェンドリンとマリー・ノエルはヨーロッパの寒い北国で無言の母親と再会し、しかも母娘の寂しい離反状態は間断なく続くのである。娘は長い放浪と冒険の一人旅をしなければならず、その旅はシンデレラや白雪姫のように結婚相手の王子との出会いで終わるのではなく、自分自身を見だし、生み出すためのものなのだ。マリーズ・コンデの言葉によれば、マリー・ノエルは「さまざまないわゆる決定論を克服し、自分のユニークな個性の定義を見つけることに成功する。」このように母デメテルを主人公にしたギリシャ神話を皮肉な形でひっくり返して、エメチェタとコンデはディアスポラの新しい意味を与え、ペルセボネ神話をカリブ海の自立的な女性神話へと勇敢に書き直すことに成功した。

*How could your daughter  
be your downfall?*

—*The Family*, p.255

Persephone, the tragic archetype of the daughter's wrenching loss of her mother by means of male violence, was turned into a romantic orphan heroine in such European fairy tales as "Rapunzel," "Cinderella," or "Snow White," with their fantasy motifs of magical help from an otherworldly godmother with a magical phallic wand and final rescue by a Prince Charming. Endlessly modernized, the motherless heroine appeared perhaps most memorably in the British *Jane Eyre*, with a fairy godmother as the wand-less moon showing the motherly aspects of nature and with the mythical male abuse of Hades as Rochester's psycho-emotional tests; but Prince Charming was still waiting after deprivation and obstacles were overcome. Motherlessness in this tradition meant that the daughter had to be utterly self-reliant and forge her identity without benefit of a role model or supportive and unconditional maternal love. Maryse Condé has said of Marie-Noëlle, the heroine of her novel *Desirada*, that she succeeds in overcoming all the "so-called determinisms . . . and in finding a definition of her own unique personality" (McCormick). That she had to do it in the presence of a mother who "did [not do] anything at all to remind her child she existed" ("Reynalda ne faisait rien de rien pour se rappeller au bon souvenir de son enfant.") is, in my reading, Condé's rewriting of the Demeter/Persephone myth. In the myth, "Demeter represents the world of the mothers. It is a green world, 'a ploughed field, a garden'" (Donovan 2). Not for Marie-Noëlle. For this daughter, "Every time they talked of her maman Marie-Noëlle sensed a feeling of danger. It was as if an icy wind blew stealthily over her shoulders and she might catch pleurisy" (Condé 11).

It helped me to set this deranged view of the mythical Demeter figure in a different focus from the European fairy tale and *Jane Eyre* heroine tradition by recalling that the 20<sup>th</sup> century African-American literary re-telling of the Demeter/Persephone myth sharpens the focus of the abandoned daughter's search for her self by showing how the anguish of self-definition within the mother-daughter dyad is complicated by the actual presence of a mother who is emotionally unavailable to her daughter. Elizabeth Hayes examined three of these daughters: Janie (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston 1937) ; Pecola (*The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison 1970) ; Celie (*The Color Purple*, Alice Walker 1982), and in these African-American novels Pecola fails, Celie finds a fairy godmother and Janie finds Prince Charming. In the Caribbean novels Emecheta's Gwendolen and Condé's Marie-Noëlle find themselves.

The deprived daughters in the Cinderella/*Jane Eyre* type of literary heroines reaped a romantic reward missing in the Greek myth—Hades turned out to be Prince Charming for them. This reassured readers that the mother's unwilling desertion in death, so common in pre-modern society, did not deprive the daughter of selfhood or adult fulfillment. But we are brutally reminded by Pecola's story that modern Persephones are engaged in a struggle to find themselves as daughters of mothers who are there with them, but with whom they have no connection. The daughter's loss does not mean the agonizing loss of the daughter for the

grieving mother, but the agony of the loss of a viable mother for the emotionally needy daughter. Gwendolen Brillianton in *The Family* (Gwendolen in Great Britain) by Buchi Emecheta (1989) and Marie-Noëlle in Maryse Condé's *Desirada* (1997; English translation 2000) are two such daughters from the Caribbean. Gwendolen is brought up in Jamaica with Granny Naomi until her emigrée mother calls her to London and Marie-Noëlle is brought up on *Desirada*, an island off Guadeloupe, with the adoring Ranélise until called to Paris by her mother.

Both girls find their Caribbean island to be enchanted:

Marie-Noëlle's childhood was an enchantment. Hand in hand with Ranélise she walked in a woodland carpeted with tree ferns, milky white trumpet flowers, and heavy-petaled heliconias rimmed with yellow. Here and there blossomed the purple flower of the wild plaintain. A cool wind tickled her nostrils, mingling with the scent of flowers, earth, wind, and rain, and her childhood was a perfumed garden." (Condé 9)

This is a garden under a dreadful spell. Not Hades, but the absent mother can pluck her daughter from the happy garden and call her into chill sterility, as happens when Marie-Noëlle is ten, Gwendolen eleven. First the loss of the mother, then the loss of the Mother Island takes from Marie-Noëlle, as it does from Gwendolen, all but herself. Her reinvention of the Persephone myth is, as Condé says, to find "a definition of her own unique personality." (McCor-mick).

Gwendolen, whose mother left for London when she was six, and who "tried once to stop her Mammy from going to England" by pointing out "that there were no bees there, so where would she find enough honey to chew as she was used to in Granville?" (Emecheta 16) there is a tantalizing connection of Mother with Demeter. The bee farm her Granny Naomi keeps "... connects her [mother as well as Granny Naomi whom "she would be the only one left to help"] directly with Demeter, for the queen bee was worshipped in ancient Greece as an avatar of the Goddess, and priestesses of Demeter were called 'Melissae' 'bees'" (Hayes 183). Indeed, there are no bees in London, and the mantle of Demeter will fall from Mammy once she is there; the absence of honey, of love, will be a deprivation for Gwendolen rather than her mother. Gwendolen seems to intuit all this, as "she did not like the bees, because she knew they could sting" (Emecheta 16). The bees of her Demeter figures, Mammy and Granny Naomi, do not "fertilize flowers and trees," they sting. And Mammy, the "queen bee [who] creates all the new life in a hive" (Hayes 183) will do so far away in England, only calling her daughter to her when she has a fourth child there.

June Bobb's analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* shows this same situation at work:

The song of the Caribbean sea is the backdrop against which *Annie John* grows to maturity. It is the same sea that transported colonist and slave to the islands, thus creating an obsession with England and things English, and encouraging the separation by color and class, typical of West Indian societies. Finally, in the novel, it is a journey by sea which brings about the literal and metaphorical separations of mother and daughter. (105)

The dedication of Emecheta's novel is "To that woman in the Diaspora who refused to sever

her umbilical cord with Africa." The umbilical cord that stretches between mother and daughter an ocean apart—literal ocean or ocean of silence in proximity—is not severed even in separation. The pain of the connection that is not nourished by the mother echoes the pain of the Middle Passage across the sea, the separation that is at the heart of the Caribbean experience and echoed in so many Caribbean women novelists' work.

Though "Marie-Noëlle had no memory of her mother leaving," (Condé 9) when she was still a tiny baby, in *The Family*, Gwendolén is six years old when mother leaves the idyllic island for England, and "the hurt of mother's departure lay heavy and tangible on one side of her chest for years after" (21). Sharon Magnarelli, considering the significance of the motherless female protagonist of classic fairy tales, says:

To have no 'real' mother during one's fairy tale childhood seems to generate two significant and related encumbrances: first, the child grows up without ever learning successfully how to interact with other people; and, secondly, and as a consequence of this, the adolescent is doomed to solitude, loneliness, and a lack of both human companionship and communicativeness. (145-46)

Both Marie-Noëlle and Gwendolén suffer the same doom and both move beyond it into themselves, though in very different ways.

Caroline Rody argues "that the complex history of the figure of the Mother [is] identified in successive moment of Caribbean literature first with Europe, then Africa, then with the islands themselves. . ." (10). In the wrench of exile from the Caribbean mother-island to a cold Northern world where a cold mother waits, an unwelcoming and non-joyous mother, unable to bring spring into the renewal of the mother-daughter bond because she has left the rich plenitude of nature behind, the daughter mourns the loss of the Mother Island in another inversion of the Demeter/Persephone myth. The daughter's return takes her *from* home; the daughter's arrival brings but continued estrangement from all that is mother: human mother and lost mother-island. The long odyssey of the homeless, motherless daughter does not end in the arms of a Prince Charming, but in an unrelieved displacement that cries out the Caribbean Persephone's enduring loss.

In an ironic reversal of the Demeter myth, the Persephone figures of Gwendolyn and Marie-Noëlle are left behind by a mother who has been seductively abducted by white society offering promise of economic survival in a place as inaccessible as Hades. Mother thus remains alive but physically and emotionally inaccessible. In order to get back to Mother, the daughters must leave the substitute mother-figure on the fecund mother-island, and journey to a wintry land in northern Europe where emotional desolation from the broken bond with the mother is the reality of their days. This reversal of the Demeter myth, a myth in which "both men and women alike find . . . a compelling evocation of the archetypal Mother, the most numinous of all the archetypal figures" (Hayes 2) is devastating to the daughter. This "numinosity" is recreated in the fairy godmother of European children's tales, but for Marie-Noëlle, as she grows up in Paris, mother is not a numinous figure at all: "The love she had felt for Reynalda and that she had buried deep inside her, since it served no purpose, had left a dry, stony spot where her heart had been. It was Reynalda's fault that she had lost interest in everything and everyone, that she drifted aimlessly through life" (Condé 83).

My Western reading of these Caribbean plots as the inversion of the Demeter/Persephone myth suggests an emphasis on the universal conditions of mother-and-daughterhood without referring to the conditions of colonization in which these were forged. There is a "disaster of which the Caribbean mother will not speak, the 'some' 'something' 'somewhere' that St. Lucia's poet Derek Walcott does not name (88), [which] is the great repressed that haunts the region's literature . . . a primal rupture, a 'deep wound' to collective memory" (Rody 109). Rody explains that "in Caribbean literature the trope of the Mother already had a long and interesting career before the current women writers' boom: first as a figure for the colonizing power, then for a reclaimed precolonial origin, still later for the vexed condition of Caribbeanness itself" (108). In the two novels discussed here, the new wrenching separation of mother from daughter, the voluntary move of mother away from daughter and back to the "outré-mer" otherness across the Atlantic Ocean, is an inversion of the matrifocal myth (mother as origin), and the "fusion of rage and longing in this figure of an inadequate, unremembering origin also illustrates the dilemma of Caribbean historiographic desire: born of such a mother, what child could know or tell his or her own history?" (Rody 109).

Absence of the mother for the orphan of European tales leaves space for her to forge an identity but the absence of the maternal bond in the presence of the mother or mother-figure in the Caribbean context sets the daughter in a desolation from which forging an identity is more formidable for its blockage of any healthy mother-daughter bond. This paradigm is the inversion of the Demeter-Persephone myth, as the inversion plays out in "the perverse family narratives imparted in a European colonial education [with its] deceptively benign conceit of the 'mother country'" (Rody 107). This is explicit the third chapter of *The Family*, "Moder Kontry." For all the pain of the forced dislocation of slaves from their original motherland, the new inverted pain of the voluntary desertion of the mother from the "new" motherland of her Caribbean island beats in the heart of the deserted daughter: "Gwendolen knew she had felt betrayed when her Mammy was happy to go" (44).

One unfortunate Demeter-like quality, however, emerges in many of these mothers-powerlessness to protect her daughter: Pecola's, Celie's, and Gwendolen's, mothers, for example, all cannot keep their daughters from rape by a father or father-figure.

Persephone's sexual maturation, including the capacity to bring forth new life, occurs when she is taken to the underworld and is raped by the god of the dead. This forced initiation into adult sexuality, or 'marriage,' is synonymous with death for Persephone, but ritual death for women is viewed as a necessary part of the natural cycle. (Hayes 191-92)

The sexual violence in the Greek myth is an echoing motif in these Caribbean novels. Raped by the Hades figure, Uncle Johnny, to eight-year-old Gwendolyn "it seemed, the end of the world had come." This is not a "ritual death" but the death of hope, of self, for Gwendolen. No mother-figure, even one as loving as Granny Naomi, can protect the powerless girl-child. To Granny Naomi's credit, after Gwendolen runs away in despair, and is forced to return to her grandmother, "surprisingly, Granny Naomi believed her" (33), went after Uncle Johnny and "Uncle Johnny stopped molesting her. But Gwendolen had lost her innocence" (35). Raped years later by her father and pregnant by him, her mother acts completely differently from

Granny Naomi and disowns her after his suicide: "She not my pikney. God died for the truth." "No, that daughter of hers was evil. Since they brought her from Jamaica, she'd been evil" (198).

The new abandonment, an abandonment of powerlessness, affects the daughter profoundly. Although Ranélise considers herself Marie-Noëlle's "real maman" she is powerless to prevent the child from being taken from her, and in the gap between this love and this powerlessness, facing the loss of Ranélise, ten-year-old Marie-Noëlle falls violently ill and leaves the hospital "not the same Marie-Noëlle who had gone in almost a month earlier" (17). Loss of mother, loss of mother-island, then the sudden death of childhood is followed by the final abandonment shown in Reynalda, who greets her daughter in Paris by "not utter[ing] a single word, neither to ask for news about her, [nor] Ranélise . . . and Marie-Noëlle sank numbly into despair." How far from Demeter "who, seeing [Persephone brought from Hades by Hermes], ran out quickly to meet her, like a Maenad coming down a mountain side, dusky with woods. So they spent all that day together in intimate communion, having many things to hear and tell" (Pater 90). In Gwendolen we see the other side, the daughter silenced, as in her own post-rape misery she "refused to say a word. She just stood there by the door, whimpering from fear of what her mother would do to her in her present mood" (170). Silence of a mother, silence of a daughter—what unspeakable sorrow are they silencing?

Different from the clear and explainable loss of the dead mother for traditional Persephone figures, for Gwendolen and Marie-Noëlle pre-adolescent abandonment turns in the confusion of unexplained loss, the empty presence of a mother and the shadowy memory of a grandmother powerless to prevent the misery, not a fairy godmother who could render wishes true. "The myth of Persephone is . . . the story of the Maiden's abduction and rape by the god of the dead and the Mother's bitter grief resonates with powerful feeling that touches even casual listeners or readers" (Hayes 1). Demeter's grief, bitter but sustaining for the daughter who can hope for a reunion, the blossoming of a new spring, and generativity created by the joyous reunion of mother with daughter, is not there for these girls. What do they substitute? Three chapters from the end of *The Family*, in the chapter "Gwendolen Alone" we see the abandoned and pregnant daughter for whom "a new kind of awareness was coming into her life. . . . Friends she could like or even love, without her wanting to live their lives for them and them wanting to do the same to her. It was a kind of relationship that did not choke. Was that a good thing?" (207). As Ludovic tells Marie-Noëlle, "Our myths are hard to dispel. We believe the ties of parenthood to be the strongest. Blood is thicker than water, repeat over and over again the voices out of Africa." He tells her how he watched her living "under the same roof as someone whose heart was as barren as a desolate savanna," how he "saw [her] become a ghost of [her] former self, [her] smile vanish, [her] cheeks hollow, [her] eyes cloud over, and even [her] hair lose its lovely color of cornhusks" (255).

Hayes posits that the "Maiden . . . becomes the Mother, who later becomes the Crone—the reproductive life cycle of women" (Hayes 192). Indeed, in the case of Gwendolen this is exactly the way the story plays out—once she says, "I am a mother now" (213) "I can work for my salvation by myself" (212), she can accept the cycle and does so by naming her daughter "Iyamide," a word used by the Yorubas of Nigeria to mean: "My mother, my female friend, my

female saviour, my anything-nice-you-can-think-of-in-a-woman's-form, is here. Iyamide" (210). Persephone did not have a Prince Charming as later European versions almost always gave the motherless heroine, but the mythical Persephone's fecund and joyous reunion with her mother is here re-spun into a fecund and liberating reunion with a new daughter who acts the role of mother and gives the Persephone figure fulfillment and joy.

It is clear that the re-focusing on the daughter as the Demeter myth is transformed in literature leads to a new concept of the daughter's independence:

Because these . . . Persephone images are stories of daughters without mothers, their primary focus is not on the mother or the maternal bond, as in the myth, but rather on the Persephone figures, particularly their self-discovery and assertion of a self in a society accustomed to assigning them a place as objects rather than subjects. The absence of mothers and the presence of weakened mother-substitutes force these women to rely chiefly on themselves. They must endure whatever ritual death is meted out to them by a patriarchal system, and they must at the same time somehow preserve or develop a strong identity, an articulate voice. If they are as weak and silent as Persephone, they will be lost. (Hayes 190-91)

Self-realization came for Gwendolen in the Maiden-to-Mother myth. Not for Marie-Noëlle. As Condé explains, "Marie-Noëlle finally reaches a point where she says, 'O.K. That's enough! From now on, I am going to live without worrying about the opinions others have of me. I am going to try to live for myself and in relation to myself'" (McCormick).

Condé's rewriting of the Persephone myth in Marie-Noëlle is profoundly disturbing to many readers, some of whom find the novel too bleak. To others, the disturbance is upsetting but ultimately liberating, for the final message is, in Condé's words, "Everyone is searching for his or her identity, but Marie-Noëlle is the only one who finishes her search and says to herself, 'I am going to live in harmony with myself without knowing the exact answers to all the questions that have been put to me'" (McCormick). Marilyn Atlas, in a discussion about the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, said, "you have to tell the story of your grandmother and you have to tell the story of your mother before you can tell your own story whether you like them or not." Emecheta and Condé have done this, but the telling of their heroine's own story is different: in *Desirada*, the Maiden-Mother-Crone progression, which was Emecheta's happy solution for Gwendolen, is short-circuited by the maiden's giving birth to herself, "her own unique personality," as Condé calls it in her brave new rewriting of the Persephone myth.

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